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Jack Anderson and Dale Van Atta

Buffoon and Terrorist

If the Ayatollah Khomeini's duly anointed successor, Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, isn't bumped out of line before the old man dies, it's a safe bet he won't last 24 hours into the long-awaited post-Khomeini era in Iran. He's too stupid to triumph over the Machiavellian mullahs and assorted cutthroats who are planning their own ascension.

This is the consensus of our intelligence contacts, as well as sources inside Iran. They note that Montazeri's undisguisable ignorance was probably his principal attribute in his designation as Khomeini's heir. He was a threat to nobody, least of all to Khomeini himself.

Other rivals for Khomeini's favor apparently figured likewise, so there was no significant opposition to his nomination. As a result, Montazeri was officially proclaimed Khomeini's successor a year ago by the Assembly of Experts, Iran's highest religious body.

How dumb is Montazeri? Even Iranian schoolchildren joke about the stupidity of the heir apparent.

Here are three of our favorite Montazeri stories:

■ Montazeri is hopelessly unfamiliar with modern technology. One day, upon landing after a 30-minute flight, he said to the pilot: "Why did we go up in the air for a half-hour trip? I could have walked that long."

■ Visiting some arid, unproductive land, Montazeri was told by the farmers that they were having a hard time growing cucumbers. In a sour twist on Marie Antoinette, Montazeri said: "If the land is not fertile enough to raise cucumbers, why don't you cultivate pickles?" He wasn't kidding; he apparently had no idea where pickles come from.

■ Montazeri took his first helicopter ride on a hot, humid day, and the chopper cabin was soon steaming. When he landed, he loudly denounced whoever had designed the aircraft: the overhead

"fan" should have been on the inside, not the outside, he said.

Butt of jokes he may be, and certainly no match for his powerful, determined rivals, but Montazeri is no cheerful, good-hearted clown. He has never been a laughing matter to American intelligence officials.

Montazeri was the prime mover and planner of a series of Iranian-backed terrorist attacks that have claimed at least 264 American lives since 1983. In addition, he is in sole charge of exporting the radical Islamic revolution of Khomeini's fundamentalists to other Middle Eastern countries. This task includes sponsorship of attempted coups and assassinations as well as other acts of terrorism.

Montazeri has consistently equaled his mentor, Khomeini, and has sometimes surpassed him in the extravagance of his sadistic religious fanaticism. It was Montazeri who promulgated the "religious decree" of 1981 that ordered prison wardens to force condemned virgins to submit to sham marriages with guards—that is, to be raped—to ensure that they would not enter paradise after their execution.

Montazeri's despicable record helps to explain why American officials aren't shedding any tears over the recently intensified power struggle in Tehran, which he appears to be losing. At least 200 of his associates were arrested in October.

The purge was instigated by the Information Ministry on Oct. 12. Among the early arrest victims were Montazeri's son, Sa'eed Montazeri; his son-in-law, Hadi Hashemi; and another close relative.

Khomeini personally called Montazeri on the carpet after summoning him to Tehran on Oct. 18. In hopes of avoiding embarrassment to himself, Khomeini tried to keep the mass arrests quiet. But with so many knives out for Montazeri, word inevitably leaked out, and on Oct. 26 Radio Tehran broadcast a letter to

Khomeini from Information Minister Mohammed Rayshahri.

As Khomeini was aware, Rayshahri wrote, Montazeri's associates had been charged with murder, kidnapping, illegal possession of arms and explosives, possession of secret official documents, forgery and engaging in illegal, covert operations.

Rayshahri asked Khomeini to applaud the arrests publicly, and Khomeini obliged. "In light of matters recently discovered or under suspicion," he wrote Rayshahri, "you are authorized to conscientiously investigate and prosecute all persons implicated as the gang's leaders, as well as those responsible for disseminating false information."

So far, that directive has not been interpreted to include Montazeri himself, and he has avoided arrest or public rebuke. This could be on Khomeini's explicit orders. Or it could be due to Montazeri's time-tested saving grace: not even his rivals figure he's bright enough to have masterminded a plot.

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